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ABSTRACT

As a result of Freud's seminal postulations of the psychoanalytic bases for one's God-concept, it is a frequently accepted hypothesis that an individual's image of God is largely a reflection of experiences with and feelings toward one's own father. While such speculations as to an individual's phenomenological conceptions of God have an intriguing psychoanalytic appeal, supporting empirical evidence has been mixed. This study investigated the relationship of 213 college students' connotations of the "wrathfulness-kindliness" of God to their mother's and father's nurturance; their mother's and father's permissiveness, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness; and their own self-esteem. While parental nurturance, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness were related to participants' conceptions of God (thus providing support for psychoanalytic assertions), the variable of self-esteem far outweighed all other variables in accounting for the variance in God-concepts. These results suggest that previous empirical support for psychoanalytic speculations as to the parental origins of individuals' God-concepts may largely derive from the influence of a strong correlate of parental nurturance and authority, i.e., self-esteem. (Author/ABL)

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Psychoanalytic Bases for One's Image of God: Fact or Artifact?

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ABSTRACT. *This study investigated the relationship of college students' connotations of the "wrathfulness-kindliness" of God to: (a) their mother's and father's nurturance, (b) their mother's and father's permissiveness, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness, and (c) their own self-esteem. While parental nurturance, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness were related to participants' conceptions of God (thus providing support for psychoanalytic assertions), the variable of self-esteem far outweighed all other variables in accounting for the variance in God-concepts. These results suggest that previous empirical support for psychoanalytic speculations as to the parental origins of individuals' God-concepts may largely derive from the influence of a strong correlate of parental nurturance and authority --- self-esteem.*

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As a result of Freud's (1928, 1938, 1946) seminal postulations of the psychoanalytic bases for one's God-concept, it is a frequently-accepted hypothesis that an individual's image of God is largely a reflection of experiences with and feelings toward one's own father. More recently, Rizzuto (1979) has

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affirmed this perspective and has extended it to both parents. As stated by Rizzuto, "The relational-representational experience with objects starts with the parents and ends with the child's creation of the divinity.... It is out of this matrix of facts and fantasies, wishes, hopes, and fears, in the exchanges with these incredible beings called parents, that the image of God is concocted" (pp. 6-7).

While such speculations as to individuals' phenomenological conceptions of God have an intriguing psychoanalytic appeal, supporting empirical evidence has been mixed. For example, researchers have reported a relationship: (a) between the father-concept and the God-concept (e.g., Siegmann, 1961); (b) between one's mother-concept and one's God-concept (e.g., Nelson & Jones, 1957; Nicholson & Edwards, 1979); and (c) between the God-concept and the conception of the more-esteemed parent (e.g., Godin & Hallez, 1965; Nelson, 1971; Strunk, 1959); furthermore, Vergote and Tamayo (1980) found no relationship between either parent-concept and the God-concept.

Two major problems have been inherent in much of this research to date. First, researchers have typically employed the same method of measurement to obtain both the participants' conceptions of their parents and their conceptions of God --- generally this has been the Q-sort or the Osgood Semantic Differential. As a consequence, obtained similarities between parent-concepts and God-concepts may largely be the result of the similarities in the instruments used to measure these concepts.

The second problem of potential import in these studies derives from the fact that individuals' experiences with their parents are strongly related to their own levels of self-esteem (e.g., Bachman, 1982; Buri, 1989; Buri,

Kirchner, & Walsh, 1987; Coopersmith, 1967; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1986). As suggested by several researchers (e.g., Gergin, 1971; Markus, 1977; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977), the self provides a potent cognitive frame of reference for the processing and interpretation of personally-relevant information. Thus, when a relationship between individuals' conceptions of their parent(s) and their conceptions of God have been obtained, self-esteem may be serving as a strong mediating factor. In fact, Benson and Spilka (1973) and Spilka, Addison, and Rosensohn (1975) have reported correlations between self-esteem and one's conception of God. It may well be the case that one's *God-concept* is more directly related to one's *self-concept* than to one's *parental concept*.

In the present study, college students were asked to complete the following questionnaires: (a) an Osgood semantic differential measure of their conception of the wrathfulness-kindliness of God, (b) parental nurturance scales, (c) parental authority questionnaires, and (d) a self-esteem scale. Bivariate correlations, partial correlations, and regression analyses were used to determine the relative merits of parent-referencing (i.e., psychoanalytic) vs. self-referencing explications of one's God-concept.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 356 Catholic college students who agreed to participate in the study as part of an introductory psychology course requirement. These students were asked to respond to the following two items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5): "God is very important in my life," and "My relationship with God gives my life a purpose

that it would not otherwise have." Only those students who *strongly agreed* (5) or *agreed* (4) with both of these statements were included in the present analyses. This control was exercised for two reasons: (a) to eliminate potential "religious disparagers" from the analyses, and (b) to increase the likelihood that participants included in the analyses had actually formulated a conception of God. The remaining 213 participants completed several questionnaires.

Materials and Procedure

The participants were asked to provide questionnaire data concerning their: (a) conception of God, (b) mother's nurturance, (c) father's nurturance, (d) mother's authority, (e) father's authority, and (f) self-esteem. Each of the research participants was told that we were investigating factors that are believed to influence self-esteem in adolescents and young adults. They were instructed that there were no right or wrong answers, and therefore they should respond to each item as honestly as possible. They were also encouraged not to spend too much time on any one item since we were interested in their first reaction to each statement. They were also reminded of the importance of responding to every item in the questionnaires.

Conception of God. Bipolar adjectives derived from Gorsuch's (1968) "wrathfulness" and "kindliness" factors in ratings of God were used to construct an Osgood Semantic Differential Scale. Eight bipolar adjective pairs comprised this scale: "avenging-comforting," "stern-gracious," "cruel-kind," "punishing-forgiving," "critical-merciful," "tough-gentle," "wrathful-patient," and "condemning-loving." The higher the score on this scale, the more nurturant and comforting is one's view of God.

Parental nurturance. Buri, Misukanis, and Mueller (1988) presented the Parental Nurturance Scale, a 24-item Likert-type scale used to measure parental nurturance from the point of view of an individual evaluating the nurturance he or she had received from his or her parents. Two forms of this scale were reported, one to measure the appraised nurturance of the mother and one to measure the appraised nurturance of the father. The test-retest reliabilities (N = 85) and Cronbach (1951) coefficient alpha values (N = 156) for these scales were, respectively: .92 and .95 for the Mother's Nurturance Scale; and .94 and .93 for the Father's Nurturance Scale. Examples of items from the Parental Nurturance Scale are: "My mother/father seldom says nice things about me," "My mother/father is often critical of me and nothing I ever do seems to please her/him," and "My mother/father expresses her/his warmth and affection for me."

Parental authority. Buri (in press) and Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, and Mueller (1988) have reported on a questionnaire based upon the parental authority prototypes of Baumrind (1971). The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) consists of 30 5-point Likert items [ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5)]. Ten of the PAQ items measure parental permissiveness, 10 measure parental authoritarianism, and 10 measure parental authoritativeness. Each participant completed two forms of the PAQ, one to evaluate the authority exercised by his/her mother and one to evaluate the authority of his/her father.

Test-retest studies of the PAQ based upon the responses of 61 college students over a two-week interval yielded the following reliabilities: r = .81 for mother's permissiveness, r = .86 for mother's authoritarianism, r = .78

for mother's authoritativeness, r = .77 for father's permissiveness, r = .85 for father's authoritarianism, and r = .92 for father's authoritativeness. Responses of 185 college students to the PAQ yielded the following Cronbach coefficient alpha values: .75 for mother's permissiveness, .85 for mother's authoritarianism, .82 for mother's authoritativeness, .74 for father's permissiveness, .87 for father's authoritarianism, and .85 for father's authoritativeness.

Examples of items from the PAQ permissive scale are: "My mother/father has always felt that what children need is to be free to make up their own minds and to do what they want to do, even if this does not agree with what their parents might want;" and "As I was growing up my mother/father allowed me to decide most things for myself without a lot of direction from her/him." Examples of items from the authoritarian scale are: "As I was growing up my mother/father did not allow me to question any decision that she/he had made;" and "My mother/father has always felt that more force should be used by parents in order to get their children to behave the way they are supposed to." Examples from the authoritative scale are: "My mother/father has always encouraged verbal give-and-take whenever I have felt that family rules and restrictions were unreasonable;" and "My mother/father had clear standards of behavior for the children in our home as I was growing up, but she/he was willing to adjust those standards to the needs of each of the individual children in the family."

Self-esteem. The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (Fitts, 1965) was used to measure self-esteem. This scale consists of 100 self-descriptive Likert-type items. The higher the score on this scale, the higher an individual's

self-esteem. As operationalized by Fitts:

> Persons with high scores tend to like themselves, feel that they are persons of value and worth, have confidence in themselves, and act accordingly. People with low scores are doubtful about their own worth; see themselves as undesirable; ...and have little faith or confidence in themselves (p. 2).

Fitts reported a test-retest reliability for the Total Positive Self-Esteem Score of $r = .92$.

Results

The intercorrelations among the variables are presented in Table 1. Consistent with previous studies which had reported findings supportive of psychoanalytic explanations for phenomenological God-concepts, the following variables were found to correlate with the participants' conceptions of God: mother's nurturance ($r = +.16$, $p < .03$), father's nurturance ($r = +.17$, $p < .03$), mother's authoritarianism ($r = -.18$, $p < .01$), and father's authoritativeness ($r = +.15$, $p < .03$); also, mother's authoritativeness and father's authoritarianism yielded r-values of +.12 and -.12, respectively, both of which approached significance at $\alpha = .05$. Also consistent with previous findings (e.g., Benson & Spilka, 1973; Spilka et al., 1975), participants' self-esteem was significantly related to their conceptions of God ($r = +.44$, $p < .00001$).

An inspection of Table 1 also reveals that strong bivariate correlations were obtained between self-esteem and the following variables: mother's nurturance ($r = +.48$, $p < .00001$), father's nurturance ($r = +.52$, $p < .00001$), mother's authoritarianism ($r = -.27$, $p < .00001$), mother's authoritativeness ($r = +.29$, $p < .0001$), father's authoritarianism ($r = -.30$, $p < .0001$), and

Table 1

Intercorrelations Among All Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. GC	1.00								
2. NURT-M	+.16**	1.00							
3. NURT-F	+.17**	+.46††	1.00						
4. PER-M	-.01	+.20†	+.07	1.00					
5. TAR-M	-.18†	-.40††	-.20†	-.44††	1.00				
6. TAT-M	+.12*	+.63††	+.31††	+.20†	-.48††	1.00			
7. PER-F	-.03	+.06	+.22†	+.62††	-.33††	+.09	1.00		
8. TAR-F	-.12*	-.13*	-.53††	-.34††	+.56††	-.20†	-.60††	1.00	
9. TAT-F	+.15**	+.31††	+.70††	+.12*	-.31††	+.47††	+.23†	-.59††	1.00
10. SE	+.44††	+.48††	+.52††	+.13*	-.27††	+.29††	+.16**	-.30††	+.37††

Note. GC = God Concept; NURT-M = Mother's Nurturance; NURT-F = Father's Nurturance; PER-M = Mother's Permissiveness; TAR-M = Mother's Authoritarianism; TAT-M = Mother's Authoritativeness; PER-F = Father's Permissiveness; TAR-F = Father's Authoritarianism; TAT-F = Father's Authoritativeness; SE = Self-Esteem.

††p <.0001 †p <.01 **p <.03 *approaching significance at α = .05

father's authoritativeness (r = +.37, p < .00001).

A summary of hierarchical regressions of the God-concept on nurturance, authoritarianism, authoritativeness, and self-esteem is reported in Table 2. The hierarchical models yield F-values, probability levels, and r^2s for each independent variable while controlling for the variance associated with pre-

viously entered variables. Since there were no theoretical determinants for the order of entry of the independent variables, they were entered based upon the strength of the bivariate correlations found in Table 1. Together, self-esteem, the nurturance variables, the authoritarianism variables, and the

Table 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses

	Dependent Variable = God-Concepts		
Independent Variables	$F(1,207)$	p	Partial r^2
Self-esteem	51.18	<.00001	.196
Mother's Authoritarianism	1.09	*ns*	.004
Father's Nurturance	1.47	*ns*	.006
Mother's Nurturance	1.38	*ns*	.005
Father's Authoritativeness	0.05	*ns*	.000
Mother's Authoritativeness	0.00	*ns*	.000
Father's Authoritarianism	1.46	*ns*	.006

authoritativeness variables explained 21.7% ($p < .00001$) of the variance in the God-concepts; the adjusted R^2 was .190. However, as is obvious from the summary provided in Table 2, once self-esteem was entered into the regression model, the remaining variables accounted for negligible proportions of the variance in participants' conceptions of God.

In an effort to evaluate the contributions to the total variance of the

nurturance and authority variables relative to the self-esteem variable, the order of entry was reversed; in other words, self-esteem was entered into the regression analyses only after all the other independent variables of interest had been entered. The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 3. Even after all of the nurturance, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness variables had been entered, thus accounting for nearly 6% of the variance, self-esteem still explained 16% ($p < .00001$) of the God-concept variance.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses With Self-Esteem Entered After the Entry of All Other Independent Variables

	Dependent Variable = God-Concepts		
Independent Variables	$F(1,207)$	p	Partial r^2
Mother's Authoritarianism	8.51	<.005	.033
Father's Nurturance	4.76	<.05	.018
Mother's Nurturance	0.37	*ns*	.001
Father's Authoritativeness	0.05	*ns*	.000
Mother's Authoritativeness	0.20	*ns*	.001
Father's Authoritarianism	0.96	*ns*	.004
Self-esteem	41.78	<.00001	.160

Dicusssion

Consistent with predictions deriving from Freudian theory, participants' phenomenological conceptions of their parents' nurturance, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness were found to be related to their conceptions of God. However, the association of these variables with the God-concept variance was clearly overshadowed by the self-esteem variable. As the hierarchical regression analyses summarized in Table 2 revealed, once the effect of self-esteem upon the God-concept variance was partialled out, only 2% of this variance was further explained by the other six variables. Furthermore, self-esteem was still able to account for 16% of the variance in participants' conceptions of God after partialling out the six nurturance and authority variables (see Table 3). These results suggest that individuals' conceptions of self are far more predictive of their conceptions of God than are their conceptions of their parents. Furthermore, these results, combined with the strong relationships found between parental nurturance and self-esteem and between parental authority and self-esteem, suggest that when researchers *have obtained* empirical support for Freudian conjectures concerning the parental-referenced bases of one's God-concept, such support may well have resulted from the concomitant effects of parental nurturance and parental authority upon self-esteem.

By way of explanation for such assertions, self-consistency theory may be of particular relevance. Several years ago Lecky (1945) postulated that one's self-conception serves as an important "filter" in the individual's interaction with and interpretation of social reality. Lecky's propositions have since been expanded, develcped, and verified by several theorists (e.g.,

Epstein, 1973, 1983; Rogers et al., 1977; Swann, 1983; Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987). As stated by Swann et al. (1987), "people strive to acquire information that confirms their self-conceptions because their thought processes are structured so that confirmatory information seems especially trustworthy, diagnostic, and accurate" (p. 881). Supporting this assertion, Stake (1981) and Swann et al. (1987) found that research participants were more apt to cognitively accept feedback that was consistent with their self-conceptions than they were to accept disconfirming feedback. Thus it should not be surprising to find that when those working in religious contexts attempt to present a balanced view of God as both forgiving and punishing, as both gentle and tough, as both loving and condemning, etc., some people (those with high self-esteem) may walk away more convinced of God's kindly nature, while others (those with low self-esteem) may depart ever more convinced of God's wrath.

Conclusions

The present findings and their interpretations seem to rest plausibly within the context of self-consistency theory. When conceptualizing God, the individual's internal frame of reference (i.e., self-esteem) is far more cogent than is the parental frame of reference proposed by Freudian theory.

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